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ABSTRACT

In the summer of 1971, the Canadian federal government initiated a major youth program known as Opportunities for Youth (OFY). The program ostensibly provided summer jobs and activities for students. The contract designer reports on program design, activities, and implications for government and education. The designer's interest was an analysis of functional relationships between the rate of technological and social change and the rate of decreasing historical authority, along with identification of societal trends in an era when educational methods are less and less capable of preparing students for discontinuity created by rapid change. Two projects in the OFY program displaying an exploratory behavior not generally reinforced by industrial society were a study of gull behavior in Newfoundland, and the creation of a child's environment called the Land of Mu. The composition of the gull project team scrambled conventional academic hierarchies and traditional professor-student relationships into a joint-learning experience with rotating scientific leadership. The Land of Mu's design environment was achieved through a breakdown of traditional relationships between students, professionals, professors, labor unions, and exhibition organisers. These projects are considered by the program designer as an aid to educators for recognizing the idea and nature of technological education. (Author/KSM)

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OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUTH: CULTURE DESIGN FOR AN UNKNOWN CULTURE

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"A culture is like the experimental space used in the study of behavior. It is a set of contingencies of reinforcement, a concept which has only recently begun to be understood. The technology of behavior which emerges is ethically neutral, but when applied to the design of a culture, the survival of the culture functions as a value."

B. F. Skinner
Beyond Freedom and Dignity

"Every government has a mission to help bring about the society of the future; to foresee and bring about the necessary change; to accept the risks of gradual social development; and to imagine in advance an evolution towards a more just society in which human beings would flourish. Far from combatting new forces that emerge, the government should try to meet them and to help them in their democratic efforts to transform, adapt and improve economic and political conditions. But contrary to what one might think if one were content only to speculate about the conduct of public affairs, the exercise of power in a society like ours is performed within a relatively restricted margin of manoeuvre. The possible responses to such problems as unemployment, for instance, or pollution or terrorism, are not numerous."

Gerard Pelletier
Secretary of State, Government of Canada
The October Crisis

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Readers interested in further information about these areas should address inquiries to either the Dept. of Manpower and Immigration, Special Programmes Branch or the Dept. of the Secretary of State, Opportunities for Youth, Ottawa, Canada.

In the summer of 1971, the Canadian federal government initiated a major socio-psychological experiment at a cost of some 25 million dollars and carried it through to a highly successful conclusion with only a few members of the government really understanding what it was about.

Known as Opportunities for Youth (OFY), the program was ostensibly to provide summer jobs and activities for students. As a contract designer of the program, I had the fascinating experience of seeing it, by turns, blamed then extravagantly praised for its secondary aims.

OFY was judged successful on 3 main counts. It fulfilled its official purpose in that it created over 26,000 summer jobs. It showed, also, that a government can be responsive to the aspirations of students; and it pleased the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and local police forces across the country who perceived it as a way of defusing possible youth unrest by keeping young people engaged in worthwhile projects.

With this multiple success confirmed, the program was extended, in modified form, for the winter and was repeated with a greatly increased budget of 35 million dollars for the summer of 1972.

Yet few members of the government have perceived that OFY had a much deeper significance: that it was, above all, an experiment

in education for the future, an attempt to examine ways in which young people can acquire an appropriate response repertoire in a society where historical authority is diminishing with the accelerating rate of technological and social change. Fortunately, those who did understand included 4 of the key figures in the cabinet: Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau; Secretary of State Gerard Pelletier, who was allotted responsibility for administering the project; Corporate and Consumer Affairs Minister Robert Andras; and Health and Welfare Minister John Munro.

When the program developed in the fall of 1970, the government's primary preoccupation was an overall high unemployment rate and the economic impact that could occur when an unresponsive economy failed to meet student summer employment expectations.

My own interest, for some time, had been a series of studies relating to the design of cultures, specifically an analysis of functional relationships between the rate of technological and social change and the compared rate of diminution of historical authority. The studies were placed within a context of understanding the process of the modification of behaviour of large groups. My other preoccupation was the problem of devising ways of identifying precursor trends, spotting clues to the way society is heading, in an era where educational methods are growing less and less capable of preparing students for discontinuity created by rapid change.

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This research was not committed to the economic aspects of job creation; but the government's preoccupation ensured that major funding was available and the job crisis seemed an ideal vehicle for a large-scale experiment.

There was, however, no question of deception. When the OFY proposal was submitted to the federal cabinet, the specific purposes and interests were fully explained; but though they were not hidden, neither were they understood, except by a few individuals. The scheme was accepted and approved by cabinet almost entirely for its surface goal: job creation in a way that would enable the government to be flexible and responsive to an age group recently admitted to the electorate and holding significantly different values from those of the parental generation.

OFY eventually became the major component in a federal government program which provided, in all, 69,000 paid jobs and unpaid activities for another 53,000 young people. The OFY component created 27,832 jobs, 21,216 for post-secondary students and 6,616 for secondary students, at a total cost of 24.3 million dollars, a figure raised in mid-summer from an initially budgeted 15 million dollars because the government was swamped with project applications from young people.

The projects were selected by a group of young people with few special qualifications beyond the fact of being the peers of

the people submitting project applications. The selectors were chosen, almost arbitrarily, from among the young people who gravitate towards Ottawa each year in search of summer jobs in the federal public service. This approach was essential to the success of the project since it was important that parental values should not be imposed on the selection procedure. It was also important that there should be no administrative structure designed to support projects once they had been selected and funded since this would have constituted, simply, a form of government supervision.

Projects received half of the funds in advance; and after a site visit by one of the selection officers to assure conformity with the project-defined goals, the balance was freed. Interestingly, only 3 of the 2316 projects were cancelled by the program. A record of integrity probably unparallelled in government funding.

The essence of OFY was that young people were to be invited to design and carry out their own summer job creation projects in virtually any field: community service, scientific research, technical innovation, recreation, or cultural or sporting activities.

The aim, at this level, was to break away from traditional industrial society concepts of summer employment which were, basically, that students could be used as low-paid, unskilled labour or in clearly defined apprentice roles: either the general arts student who sweeps the railway yards or else the engineering student who spends 3 months at a workbench provided by some potential future employer.

To replace this industrial age concept, OFY said to young people, in effect: "Tell us what you think is worthwhile and we will give you the money to do it." Pay was kept low, roughly 1,000 dollars per student for 3 months work; thus through self-selection the work creation would be reinforcing. Though it was a minor restriction to the experiment, the government was obliged to include one basic taboo: that no profit-making schemes would be accepted. This was an implicit sop to the business community and organized labour at a time when the economy was too fragile to be strained by new, artificially-created enterprises and to avoid drawing the hostility of other unemployed groups. Interestingly, much of the early hostility to the program in the Canadian media centred on this very point. "You are killing the initiative of Canada's youth by barring them from seeking profit", "You are condemning them to frivolous activities," etc.

Predictably, however, most of the media hostility focussed on the minority of projects which were potentially disruptive of traditional social values. In the design it was predicted that, according to a normal curve, 80 per cent of the approved projects would be interesting, reasonably worthwhile, but not particularly remarkable. I was interested in the 10 per cent on the far side of the curve: those projects which were genuinely innovative in ways not necessarily perceived either by the government or the public, the 10 per cent where precursor trends of low visibility/ reasonable probability social or technological change could be identified.

The media were preoccupied with the 10 per cent on the other side of the curve, the predictable and headline-making disasters. In the first weeks of the program, news and editorial pages were full of such themes as: "How dare the federal government fund a rural youth camp whose organisers are growing marijuana?" or "Federal government funds nude commune," or "Pornographic underground paper gets big grant".

Everyone's favourite disaster was a projected tent city for summer transients in Toronto, known as Wacheea, which was the subject of virtually continuous controversy throughout the summer. Toronto's city worthies all projected their favourite immorality fantasies into the tents and predicted what would happen in them if a site were provided; and there was headline after headline about the rather naive and confused leftist politics of the organisers.

It all ensured that OFY got off to a lively start and it was nearly 2 months before more sober evaluations began to appear in the media.

But even when the disastrous 10 per cent of the normal curve was put into perspective, the whole program was still judged primarily in simplistic economic terms. Both parliament and public evaluated the scheme in terms of the numbers of jobs created. When the evaluation went beyond this level, it took interesting but still rather superficial tracks.

One major preoccupation was whether it was right for the government to act on this sector, to spend money on this particular segment of the unemployment market. Was the government pandering to youth? Was it a sinister plot to defuse, in fact buy off, social unrest? Was it a sinister plot to cause unrest?

When the program ended in October of 1971, many authorities praised the scheme both privately and in public statements for having avoided a hot summer of rioting and student discontent. No one seemed to have noticed that there was no major student unrest that summer in other countries which did not have such a scheme. It seems reasonable to suppose that by keeping 27,000 young people occupied, the scheme was a minor factor in obviating social unrest; but if the winds had been for political violence, many of the underground newspapers, communes, and community groups the government was funding would have made excellent bases for subversive action. But despite this evidence, the function of defusing social violence was added to the scheme's stock of credit along with the function of demonstrating that the federal government was prepared to come to terms with youth's idealism and desire for social involvement: "Putting our money where they say their ideals are.", Prime Minister Trudeau called it in one speech.

Little attention was given to one very valid criticism at this level: that the scheme's design did not attract the participation of young people from economically or educationally disadvantaged backgrounds. Research on this problem is being conducted now.

Much more significantly, however, the deeper implication of the project design was scarcely examined at all. The basic premise of OFY was that industrial societies do not normally provide generalised reinforcement for exploratory behaviour whereas, in fact, exploratory behaviour is one of the principal requirements of a successful transition to a post-industrial era. OFY reinforced exploratory behaviour on a grand scale and it also facilitated the identification of precursor trends by stimulating young people into feeding their thinking towards government through the structure of the program.

Many observers of the program, including some national newspaper editors and several government figures, perceived OFY primarily in paternalist terms, as the government paying young people to engage in good works. "It will keep them off the streets, provide them with pocket money and, hopefully, make many members of the adult society see that hippies are not all bad." Few analysts realised that the praise or blame of the parental culture was almost totally irrelevant to the young people engaged in the projects.

The only controls built in to OFY were such as to keep projects roughly within politically viable parameters. Most of the projects, the expected 80 per cent in fact, fell well within the parameters of a somewhat expanded Canadian liberal context. Such political extremism as did emerge generally fell within the 10 per cent disasters. The real revolutionary activity, meanwhile, passed virtually unnoticed within the 10 per cent high achievement projects, some of which contained clear warning indications that the death of the traditional educational system is probably much closer than politicians or educators realise.

The media and members of parliament grumbled about the shopworn rhetoric of the tent city freaks. Mayors across the country praised the new but non-threatening, youth-originated programs as evidence that not all kids were dope-smoking, long-haired horrors.

More perceptive observers directed their attention to projects which barely gained media attention at all; like the gull behaviour project in Newfoundland, or a child's environment called the Land of Mu, put on as part of Toronto's summer exhibition and fair. These 2 projects were typical of the important group of "sleepers", the projects which had a great deal to teach the behavioural scientist interested in the development of education and the techniques of cultural design.

The Avian study program was to examine ways of controlling gulls which had become a serious water pollution hazard on town reservoirs in Newfoundland. This control was to be achieved without destroying the gulls which are important to the ecology of the ocean and island and without adulterating the reservoir water by noxious chemical control. Experimentally, the aim was to make one lake aversive to gulls while maintaining the attractiveness to the birds of a "control" lake nearby. The group systematically tested a wide variety of aversive techniques ranging from whistles and buzzers to hallucinogenic drugs. (This latter method was, incidentally, very successful. Fish soaked in a hallucinogen was placed as bait and when the gull took it, it shortly experienced drug effect, essentially a very heavy bad trip. The tripping birds started emitting fear signs and sounds, signalling other gulls to avoid the location. The method was rejected, among other reasons, because of fears that the bait would extend in the environment and end up freaking out other creatures besides the gulls.)

Overall, the Avian study was technically very successful and has led to the publication of several substantial scientific papers on techniques for controlling habitation and preventing pollution. Currently the project is being continued with the assistance of the Department of Transport to study bird control at airports.

The project members continued as psychology undergraduates; and as one of their professors mused: "Where are we going to send them to graduate school?".

But of more interest was the composition of the project team which completely scrambled conventional academic hierarchies and dissolved traditional professor-student relationships into a genuine joint-learning experience with scientific leadership rotating sapientially among project members.

It achieved gull control at incredibly low research cost (6,000 dollars); but it also put alert academics on notice that educational structures geared to the downward transmission of knowledge are not only theoretically unsuitable for the coming era, but are also already disappearing in practice.

While this new educational concept was being lived out spontaneously in Newfoundland, the children's environment in Toronto was teaching equally dramatic lessons. The general public, many thousands of whom gratefully released their children to the student organisers for a 40-minute journey through the polythene, polystyrene and water-bed world of the Land of Mu, saw primarily a place in which children could roam and play freely and safely, paint pictures and act. The Land of Mu was a well-designed experiment with its milieu the real world of commercial competition on the Midway of the Canadian National Exhibition in Toronto and it proved to be a spectacularly successful drawing attraction.

In its interior structuring, the project showed, on analysis, that the innovative design environment had been achieved through a complete breakdown of traditional relationships between students, professional bodies, professors and labour unions and the exhibition organisers. The project violated traditional links between young and old, professor and student, guild and apprentice, and between organiser and organised with the project team quietly living out a dozen different experiments in future institutional change.

A great many projects, certainly the majority of the 80 per cent in the middle range, were also successful but in less telling ways. The middle range projects either fulfilled a community need or identified a new one; and many were able to adapt new skills, such as video-tape handling, to conventional problems and services.

One project that was expected to be either spectacularly innovative or spectacularly disastrous, an effort to strengthen the service resource base of Toronto's homosexual community organisation, turned out to be just such a routine project and quite successful in a routine way. The project created a broad-range community service agency for homophiles and went a long way to achieving the organisation's acceptance within conventional inter-agencies structures in the city.

Typical of hundreds of banal but successful projects was a lifeguard operation at Snow Lake in Manitoba which went slightly beyond conventional lifeguarding to provide swimming lessons and

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teach local teenagers to deal with the special weather problems experienced in the area that summer, which one suspects they all learn anyway.

At the other end of the curve, there were the disasters but not even these were fully documented. A lot of attention was paid to the incipient marijuana farm and the nude commune but a more sophisticated disaster missed general notice. One of the projects, Project Delta, sent a group of Toronto students to Inuvik in the Arctic to "do good among the Eskimos". The project was approved at OFY headquarters in the peer selection process; and it illustrated that peer selection obviously had its peculiar weaknesses, even though no other selection procedure was appropriate. The idea of southern urban kids going north to help Eskimos was in essence a liberal paternalist fantasy (junior version) and it struck a responsive chord among the peers on the selection committee.. On arrival, the students proved themselves completely incapable of relating to Eskimos and ended up doing rather mixed-up and ineffectual social work among the white kids of expatriate civil servants serving in the northland. The lesson of Project Delta was that peer selection can, of itself, produce or reinforce disaster. Wisdom does not come built in; but there can be no intervention of the parental culture in structures designed to reinforce exploratory behaviour. The exploration must take its course--to success or disaster.

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The final evaluation of OFY made by the government, and in the end by the media too, was positive in virtually every area. Students were employed and their tasks were seen (by themselves) as meaningful rather than makework. The Department of National Health and Welfare was happy. The police were happy. The Finance Ministry which used the largesse to manipulate the economy with many millions of dollars was happy. And the Department of Manpower's statisticians were happy with the 27,000 deduction from the unemployment rolls.

A winter project of 150 million dollars modelled on OFY was implemented immediately and the next summer a much enlarged OFY program was underway. By this time, the full scope of the implications has been more widely realised with the result that more purposeful experimentation is underway.

This understanding of the implications is beginning, slowly, to permeate educational circles. Educators are much preoccupied with the problems of educating in a fast-changing society. Most have reached the stage of recognising that the present linear structures will have to be, and are being, broken down. There is growing recognition that trying to educate young people in a single streak by providing them with a block of knowledge that will stand them in good stead for a lifetime is outmoded.

But few educators are at ease, as yet, with the idea that we simply do not yet know what technological education is. The Canadian institutional way, however, has been a cautious transition.